United Nations TD/B/WP/291

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
25 June 2018

Original: English

Trade and Development Board
Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget
Seventy-sixth session
Geneva, 3–5 September 2018
Item 4 (a) of the provisional agenda

Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects completed between April 2017 and April 2018. The aim is to report on all evaluation activities and to promote accountability and benefit from lessons learned. Evaluation synthesis reports are knowledge products and a means to consolidate and share acquired knowledge and strengthen evaluation feedback and learning loops.

2. Evaluations at UNCTAD are conducted against the 2011 Evaluation Policy[1] and the updated 2016 Norms and Standards for Evaluation[2] outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group. The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions from the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and best practices. This information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work. Programme managers at UNCTAD are encouraged to refer to previous reports and overviews[3] of evaluations of activities in designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.

I. Summary of evaluation findings

3. At the request of the Trade and Development Board, at its sixty-second annual session, the UNCTAD secretariat conducted an independent in-depth evaluation of subprogramme 4 on technology and logistics. This was merged with the planned external evaluation of United Nations Development Account project 1213I on strengthening national capacities to manage policies and frameworks on science, technology and

[1] http://unctad.org/Sections/edm_dir/docs/osg_EvaluationPolicy2011_en.pdf (accessed 7 June 2018).
[2] http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914 (accessed 7 June 2018).
[3] http://unctad.org/en/Pages/About per cent20UNCTAD/Evaluation per cent20at per cent20UNCTAD/Eval-All.aspx (accessed 13 June 2018).

GE.18-10368(E)
1810368

Please recycle

innovation in Asian countries, managed by the same subprogramme, in order to maximize synergies and efficiencies between the two exercises.

4. External project evaluations were completed of the following projects supported by the United Nations Development Account:

(a) Project 1213P: Strengthening pro-growth macroeconomic management capacities for enhanced regional financial and monetary cooperation among selected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and West and Central Africa;

(b) Project 1415AX: Support developing country policymakers in the formulation of national entrepreneurship policies through the implementation of entrepreneurship policy frameworks.

5. Key findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations are described below.

A. External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 4: Technology and logistics

6. This independent, in-depth evaluation assesses the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of subprogramme 4, as implemented by the Division on Technology and Logistics between 2012 and 2016. The main findings and recommendations of the evaluation are highlighted below.

7. The evaluation concluded that the diversified portfolio of subprogramme 4 is mostly of high quality and relevant to the needs of its beneficiaries and stakeholders. Overall, capacity-building interventions resulted in improved knowledge, in turn utilized for further training, policy advice and research. The evaluation also concluded that value added of subprogramme 4 lies in cross-fertilization between the technical cooperation, research and intergovernmental consensus-building pillars, including through the leveraging of a wide range of partnerships. It also noted that there remains scope to strengthen synergistic efforts, including through interdivisional and external collaboration, especially in the areas of science, technology and innovation; the digital economy, in particular e-commerce; and the sustainability aspects of transport, which are of increasing relevance in the light of the Nairobi Maafikiano, adopted at the fourteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

8. The evaluation highlighted that in order for the Division on Technology and Logistics to fulfil its expanded mandate to member State expectations, additional resources will be required. A systematic approach to fundraising is needed, accompanied by the effective communication of evidence-based results. Donor preferences have shifted towards funding larger, longer-term programmes with clear intervention logics and due attention to the sustainability of outcomes. The integrated approach to creating the equitable global economic environment envisaged in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also has implications for results-based management. UNCTAD has taken positive steps to strengthen its results-based management framework and ensure its alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the overall assessment of the evaluation team is that these efforts are unevenly applied and that gaps remain. Nonetheless, there is scope to improve the mainstreaming of gender into the subprogramme 4 portfolio. This will require additional expertise, continued and targeted capacity-building and coaching, and clear guidance on incorporating gender mainstreaming in the planning, management and monitoring of technical cooperation projects and research products, as part of organization-wide efforts at UNCTAD.

9. On the basis of its observations, the evaluation team presented six recommendations to the Secretary-General of UNCTAD and the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics. With regard to the expanded mandate provided by the Nairobi Maafikiano, the evaluation recommended considering ways to prioritize existing resources and restructuring, if necessary, to support UNCTAD work on e-commerce, the digital economy and science, technology and innovation for sustainable development. The evaluation also recommended the assessment, improvement and enforcement of the UNCTAD results-

based management framework. At the Division level, the evaluation recommended that strict and consistent implementation should be ensured throughout its portfolio and that a detailed fundraising plan be developed and implemented with differentiated strategies by type of donor, including the private sector. With regard to communication, the evaluation team recommended that the Division develop and implement an evidence-based results communications strategy, targeting a diverse audience. Another recommendation was the enhanced delivery of technical assistance, in the form of sustainable programmatic interventions with a clear intervention logic. Finally, the evaluation recommended that the Division make increasing use of regional approaches, as challenges are addressed most effectively through regional organizations.

10. In its management response, the secretariat welcomed the evaluation and accepted the recommendations. The UNCTAD secretariat took note of the conclusions of the evaluation and stated that it would continue its work and initiatives in line with the recommendations. The secretariat commended the effort and dedication of the evaluation team for its independent, objective and professional evaluation, given the particularly complex and comprehensive nature of the activities undertaken by the Division on Technology and Logistics under subprogramme 4.

B. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account projects

1. External evaluation: Strengthening pro-growth macroeconomic management capacities for enhanced regional financial and monetary cooperation among selected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and West and Central Africa (1213P).

11. This project, implemented between July 2013 and April 2017, was designed to strengthen pro-growth macroeconomic management capacities for enhanced regional financial and monetary cooperation. The project included research activities that could have a direct impact on 46 countries (through their membership of multilateral or regional institutions and mechanisms), as well as the co-hosting of seminars and dissemination activities in eight countries.

12. The evaluator-concluded project was highly relevant at both the regional and national levels, fully in line with several United Nations conferences and summits and directly linked with the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals and subsequently, the Sustainable Development Goals. It built upon UNCTAD experience in macroeconomic analysis and policy dialogue. It contributed to the mandate of UNCTAD by coordinating actions towards increasing the understanding of the global economic environment and of policy choices, as well as promoting regional cooperation. However, while it responded to a research logic, its design was not underpinned by a robust theory of institutional or political change. In particular, the project addressed the enhancement of knowledge of individuals (as confirmed by 90 per cent of surveyed participants) but the strategy for contributing towards the other important dimensions of capacity-building – namely the organizational level and the enabling environment – was unclear. It also brought a global perspective to what could otherwise have remained discrete regional understandings. On the other hand, evidence is unclear on the extent to which it contributed towards achieving greater consensus at any level.

13. The report noted that there existed an efficient division of tasks within UNCTAD and an outstanding collaboration between UNCTAD and the different counterparts that allowed the project to respond to difficulties and changing needs. It nevertheless struggled to cover the required technical and administrative support. Although it was too early to draw any conclusions on sustainability, the evaluation acknowledged that the project's activities helped generate interest in pro-growth macroeconomic financial and monetary integration and resulted in several collaborations. A gender perspective was not incorporated during design or implementation. On the other hand, the project was implemented with a clear human rights perspective and contributed to increasing awareness on the impact of macroeconomic policies in social equity.

14. Based on these findings, the evaluator proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) UNCTAD should enhance its results-based management culture for effective evaluation and results management by providing ongoing training to managers and staff in the various aspects of results management, including self-evaluation;

(b) UNCTAD should strengthen the learning focus by regularly assessing project evaluability, implementing results-oriented monitoring and/or midterm evaluations and organizing structured learning events;

(c) UNCTAD should review its procedures and develop guidelines and tools to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed into planning, monitoring and reporting mechanisms;

(d) Project management should draw up an exit strategy at the outset of the project and/or during its implementation to maximize the project's sustainability;

(e) UNCTAD should assess its capacities to cover all the technical and administrative support required by Development Account projects, including monitoring and collecting information from beneficiaries;

(f) UNCTAD should review its procedures to develop guidelines and tools to ensure that good capacity development practices are mainstreamed into planning, monitoring and reporting mechanisms;

(g) Project management should ensure that the events, publications, specific findings and the like are broadly disseminated, for example through the media or interim publications.

2. External evaluation: Support developing country policymakers in the formulation of national entrepreneurship policies through the implementation of entrepreneurship policy frameworks (1415AX)

15. This project, implemented between June 2015 and December 2017, was aimed at enhancing policymakers' capacities for the design and implementation of entrepreneurship policies. The project was implemented in six countries (Cameroon, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, the Gambia, and the United Republic of Tanzania) and included networking and knowledge-sharing activities involving stakeholders from these and other countries of the same regions.

16. The evaluation concluded that the project was highly relevant from different perspectives and exploited the comparative advantage of UNCTAD in entrepreneurship policies. It addressed entrepreneurs' issues and focused on Governments' capacities in line with the strategic framework of UNCTAD, including Development Account objectives and the Sustainable Development Goals. The project was internally consistent in general terms, but it could have recommended specific activities to better connect the participants of the national access-to-finance working groups with the regional meetings on insurance and accounting. The evaluation found that the project had been effective in meeting its planned objectives and outcomes, and its beneficiaries were satisfied on the whole. The six beneficiary countries demonstrated the capacity to produce entrepreneurship action plans in a participatory way, and four of them officially adopted the plan and had begun to implement it. This was done by following the project's sequential approach, although its first component, online training, did not work as expected.

17. The evaluation found that the implementation and technical monitoring of the project was efficient but that the financial monitoring was not. Further, it was difficult to make a clear assessment of the project's sustainability, although the project methodology, based on participatory workshops and working groups, and plans containing precise and accountable commitments, all favoured ownership and sustainability. The gender and inclusive approach of the project was not clear, although equal participation of men and women was sought during the implementation of the project. Also, more than the half of the people surveyed (mostly attendees of the national workshops) stated that they had been made aware of the gender dimension of entrepreneurship policies. Apart from the choice of

countries and the balance of least developed countries, the project did not put a focus on vulnerable groups as potential entrepreneurs. The report notes that although numerous partnerships were furthered by the project, their strategic value was not clear. Finally, the evaluation found that conclusions on impact could not be drawn.

18. Based on the findings, the evaluator proposed the following key recommendations to the Enterprise Branch of the Division on Investment and Enterprise:

(a) The Branch should scale up the project and put in place a permanent service through which Member States, mainly the least developed countries, can request technical assistance;

(b) The Branch should consider a second phase of technical assistance to reinforce the implementation of action plans in the partner countries and capitalize on implementation experiences. The implementation reviews, or other follow-up activities on action plans by UNCTAD, could address the impact assessment of the plans;

(c) The Branch should carry out a multi-stakeholder analysis and rethink its strategic position as a global United Nations actor in the field of entrepreneurship;

(d) If the entrepreneurship policy frameworks are to be revised, the Branch should determine whether there is widespread interest in market issues among project beneficiaries and whether they might consider the inclusion of an access-to-markets component in the framework.

19. The evaluator made the following general recommendations:

(a) In future initiatives oriented to the formulation of entrepreneurship action plans, UNCTAD should rationalize more effectively the contributions from related services and branches (accounting and insurance, e-regulation);

(b) The Resources Management Service of UNCTAD should take steps to report regularly to the project management teams on an activity basis. If to do so is deemed inefficient, the Service should instead devise a new and cost-effective way to carry out practicable activity-based budgetary follow-ups.

II. Lessons learned

20. Evaluation plays a crucial role in contributing to the United Nations system's enhancement of the impacts and results of its support to Member States in their efforts to implement the 2030 Development Agenda and meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group and recently updated norms and standards, the UNCTAD secretariat is committed to efforts enhancing the use of evaluation and improving evidence-based decision-making and accountability. Evaluations provide a comprehensive, systematic, transparent and objective approach to assessing the performance of programmes and the work of UNCTAD. The secretariat advocates the importance of stakeholders applying such lessons to a broader range of programme management aims at UNCTAD, in order to feed into UNCTAD programme planning and strategic decision-making.

21. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities (TD/B/WP/286, TD/B/WP/280, TD/B/WP/273, TD/B/WP/263 and TD/B/WP/254) remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing their programmes and projects. This report focuses on lessons learned that have been extrapolated from the three evaluations that were completed during the reporting period.

A. Lessons learned: Technology and logistics

22. The evaluation of subprogramme 4 on technology and logistics identified the following good practices and lessons learned:

(a) Broad consultations with a wide array of stakeholders with regard to science, technology and innovation policy reviews ensure a wide range of perspectives and buy-in.

UNCTAD should broaden its approach to provide support for the implementation of recommendations within the framework of such reviews, policy monitoring and follow-up assessments of new policies. This could also mitigate the present bias towards the research needs of academic institutions versus the practical technology needs of the productive sector;

(b) As evidenced by the implementation of the Automated System of Customs Data Entry, Control and Management in Rwanda, institutionalizing the capacity to train information technology experts within the training centres of customs authorities is a good strategy for enhancing the sustainability of results;

(c) Alumni networks are a key value added for UNCTAD and deserve to be further and better leveraged for enhanced visibility and ownership;

(d) The concept of the Division on Technology and Logistics of delivering training by mobilizing the resources of partner ports may serve as a model for delivering other similar technical capacity-building assistance;

(e) Emerging evidence suggests that, where there are regional institutional frameworks to link into, regional approaches are an effective and efficient way to address cross-border challenges;

(f) As UNCTAD is not a field-based entity, the following three models for delivering technical cooperation appear to have worked well: providing inputs to the interventions of other development actors; intervening through formalized cooperation with organizations that have a strong field presence; and directly implementing stand-alone projects where sufficient funding for field-based support staff and monitoring and evaluation is available.

B. Lessons learned: Macroeconomic management capacities

23. The external evaluation of Development Account project 1213P (Strengthening pro-growth macroeconomic management capacities for enhanced regional financial and monetary cooperation among selected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and West and Central Africa) identified the following lessons learned:

(a) UNCTAD has a strong record and a reputation for excellence in all regions. Its involvement has the potential to bring about significant efficiency gains by catalysing dialogue, facilitating access to cutting-edge knowledge and attracting additional contributions into the projects (in-kind or others). In line with its mandate, UNCTAD promotes multilateral dialogue, knowledge sharing and networking at the regional level, and works to promote both intraregional and interregional cooperation;

(b) The role of the Development Account as a vehicle for member countries to tap into the normative and analytical expertise of the United Nations Secretariat was evident throughout the project. By offering distinctive knowledge and skills that are rarely provided by other development partners, the Development Account is well placed to act as a game changer by promoting the exchange of knowledge and transferring skills among countries;

(c) Without Development Account support, and without the work guided by UNCTAD, in many countries, these particular issues relating to financial and monetary integration and macroeconomic cooperation would not have been examined, and these types of discussion would not have taken place.

(d) South–South cooperation in financial and monetary issues, a trend explored by the project, is one of the most significant new trends of the last couple of decades. The Development Account and UNCTAD have provided important information on the extent of this trend, its impact and what is needed at the policy level to derive developmental benefits from it.

C. Lessons learned: National entrepreneurship policies

24. The external evaluation of Development Account project 1415AX (Support developing country policymakers in the formulation of national entrepreneurship policies through the implementation of entrepreneurship policy frameworks) identified the following lessons learned:

(a) The provision of UNCTAD technical assistance in specific aspects of entrepreneurship cannot be planned in detail in advance and should be decided after the countries have formulated their plans. During the definition of the plans, UNCTAD experts have a relevant role in presenting inspiring experiences from other countries;

(b) When providing assistance to different groups of officials, and to government offices within a country, the connections and communications among them must not be taken for granted, and specific activities to better connect participants may be needed;

(c) Online training is attractive because of its outreach potential and low cost, but certain policy developments require country-specific training programmes.

25. The evaluation report also identified some good practices:

(a) The entrepreneurship workshops guided by the entrepreneurship policy framework methodology are a good model for participatory policy planning and intelligence gathering;

(b) Plans containing precise and accountable commitments, discussed in participatory workshops, favour the ownership and sustainability of newly designed policies;

(c) National entrepreneurship awards, such as the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Award in Ecuador, are a good tool for incentivizing both the review of a plan and the sharing of good practices.

III. Evaluation plan

26. The Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget fulfils an important oversight function through its consideration each year of external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects. The subject of the evaluation is usually in accordance with a three-year evaluation plan that is approved by the Trade and Development Board. Subprogramme evaluations approved by member States are generally conducted in the first quarter of the year by an evaluation team comprising a professional evaluator supported by two representatives of UNCTAD member States who participate in the evaluations in a personal capacity, bringing their unique expertise, perspectives and experiences to the evaluations. Depending on the nature and scope of work of a subprogramme and the available budget, a decision may be made at the recruitment stage of the professional (lead) evaluator to also assign an associate evaluator, to obtain complete coverage in terms of expertise and experience related to the substantive matters of the subprogramme. Evaluation teams usually present their reports at a Working Party meeting held in the third quarter of the year.

27. In line with the decision of the Trade and Development Board at its fifty-ninth session regarding measures to strengthen results-based management and the evaluation of programmes of work, the Working Party agreed at its sixty-third session to a trial implementation of the approach of ensuring the systematic evaluations of UNCTAD subprogrammes. Accordingly, the Working Party considered the external evaluation of subprogramme 1 in 2013, subprogramme 2 in 2014, subprogramme 3 in 2015, subprogramme 4 in 2017 and subprogramme 5 in 2018.

28. Upon completion of the first cycle of subprogramme evaluations in 2018, the secretariat proposes to present for the consideration of the Working Party at its next session in September 2019 a review of evaluation findings from the five subprogramme evaluations conducted to date and an update on the status of implementation of recommendations from the five subprogramme evaluations. This stocktaking exercise would give member States an opportunity to reflect on a pilot approach to evaluate subprogrammes.

29. In accordance with established practice, following decision 2003/7 of 19 September 2003 to invite the secretariat to propose future evaluation plans, [4] the secretariat proposes to continue the current subprogramme model of evaluations following the stocktaking exercise in 2019. The subprogramme evaluation approach complies with rule 104.5(d)(ii) of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation: "The subprogramme shall be the main unit of analysis, review and evaluation in the United Nations planning and programming system".[5] Subprogramme evaluations provide an overall coverage of the programme of work of UNCTAD, cutting across its three pillars of work. Further, the first round of subprogramme evaluations provide a valuable baseline for UNCTAD to assess continued improvements with respect to its effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and sustainability. The next round of subprogramme evaluations will build upon the findings of previous exercises and assess progress and changing contexts.

30. To ensure a more robust evaluation function that better supports continuous efforts towards improvement, member States are invited to support evaluations through extrabudgetary contributions. These contributions will be utilized to expand the number and coverage of evaluations in UNCTAD, advance efforts towards strengthening the evaluation culture at UNCTAD and respond to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

31. The Working Party is invited to submit its conclusions and recommendations to the Trade and Development Board.

---

[4] TD/B/50/12-TD/B/WP/169, chapter I.B.

[5] ST/SGB/2016/6. The current Financial Regulations and Rules of the United Nations are contained in ST/SGB/2013/4. The planning, programming, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation cycle of the United Nations has evolved over time; major resolutions on the process include the following General Assembly resolutions: 41/213 of 19 December 1986, 42/211 of 21 December 1987, 45/248 of 21 December 1990, 58/269 of 23 December 2003 and 62/224 of 22 December 2007.